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The National Democratic Institute (NDI) appreciates this opportunity to present its views on political reform in the Arab and Muslim world. The Institute is pleased to have been working to strengthen and promote democracy in the Middle East and Central Asia for more than 15 years.

The question before us is how the United States and other democratic nations can best support the development of indigenous forms of democracy throughout the Arab and Muslim world and, by so doing, establish a foundation for cooperation in pursuit of peace, prosperity and freedom from terror.

NDI believes that the United States should attach the highest priority to democratic development as an essential element of its foreign assistance programs. Autocracy, corruption and lack of accountability create instability and foster political extremism. Establishing a democratic political process provides the best possibilities for developing governmental policies that address economic, social and other issues that are essential for advancing human dignity

Building Democratic Institutions

The appropriate role of NDI and similar organizations is to provide support for those forces in non-democratic societies that are seeking to promote peaceful political change, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, or at great personal risk to themselves. In new democracies, governments, political parties and civil society are finding ways to work cooperatively to construct and consolidate their nascent democratic institutions.

Democracy assistance programs are only successful when we are seen to be supporting indigenous forces for democratic change. In other words, US interests are best served when we are seen as standing behind people, not in front of them; when we follow, not lead; and when there are self-motivated and dedicated people on the ground pursuing homegrown initiatives for democratic reform or consolidation.

NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright remarked last March at the meeting of the Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World in Istanbul: "It is not true that we intend or desire to impose anything upon anybody. Even if we did, we could not succeed. Because democracy is defined by the right of people to express freely their own views about who should lead their own societies. The truth is that, in any place at any time, it is dictatorship that is an imposition; democracy is a choice. At the core of democracy is the premise that governments have an obligation to respect the rights and dignity of their citizens."

In some cases, democracy assistance has played a critical and transformative role at a certain moment in a country's democratic transition. In other situations, longer-term assistance has allowed for the growth and development of stable, democratic institutions and processes grounded in the principles of inclusion, transparency and accountability. And in those places where democratic change has not occurred or has stalled, assistance has provided protection to, and solidarity with, courageous democrats seeking peaceful reform.

### Pluralism in Democracy Promotion

NGOs such as NDI have greatly appreciated the expansion of democracy initiatives undertaken by the U.S. government. U.S. government support for democracy programs comes from a variety of sources and through various mechanisms. In the early 1980s, these programs were funded primarily through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The NED and its core institutes -- NDI, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Solidarity Center and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) -- give concrete expression to America's democratic values while serving our country's national interest by promoting political environments that are inhospitable to political extremism.

Since the 1980s, support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has allowed for a significant increase in democracy promotion activities, as has the Department of State's application of Economic Support Funds for these purposes. Increased resources within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) have allowed even greater opportunities for much-needed assistance.

Pluralism in democracy assistance has served the United States well. It has allowed for diverse yet complementary programming that, over the long term, could not be sustained by a highly static and centralized system. Funding by the NED, for example, has allowed NDI and the core institutes of the Endowment to respond quickly and flexibly to emerging opportunities and sudden problems in rapidly shifting political environments. Also, the NED has been able to operate effectively in closed societies where direct government engagement is more difficult. USAID funds have provided the basis for a longer-term commitment in helping to develop a country's democratic institutions; and funding from DRL and other programs within the State Department, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), have given the U.S. government the capacity to support, without cumbersome regulations, cutting-edge and highly focused democracy programs in individual countries, and for regional and global initiatives. . NDI programs in the Middle East and Central Asia have relied on support from USAID, NED, DRL and MEPI.

### Democracy Promotion in the Greater Middle East

Understandably, much attention is currently being paid to the lack of democratic institutions in the greater Middle East, and President Bush has made addressing this problem a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy.

Two watershed electoral exercises earlier this year in Iraq and the Palestinian territories have inspired democrats across the region and beyond. The upcoming Palestinian legislative elections, Lebanese polls scheduled for late May and the Egyptian presidential contest in

October, could prove to be a testing ground for the future of political contestation in the region, and will have an impact on democratic reform and elections throughout the region.

The frequent justifications for the slow pace of reform in the Arab world -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, poverty and/or the existence of internal Islamic terrorist groups -- won't stand up to the demonstration effect of millions of Iraq's embattled citizens going to the polls to cast a free vote. In dictatorships like Syria, and in unreformed hereditary monarchies like Saudi Arabia, citizens are likely to ask "if them, why not us?", even though further movement towards democracy may well be blocked. The demonstration effect will also be felt by political and economic liberalizers like Jordan, Qatar and Bahrain, by semi-authoritarian Egypt, and by countries like Morocco and Yemen that have already embarked on a political reform path.

In the past, diplomatic efforts and foreign aid in the Middle East, while sometimes having a component described as "democracy and governance," appeared to be designed largely to show tangible results from the pursuit of regional peace, and contained few programs that challenged entrenched political authorities or that encouraged a more vigorous legislative branch.

Much of the aid for political and democratic reform was channeled through official conduits, using formal and informal bilateral agreements. This reliance on official sanction for democracy aid programs virtually guaranteed that political reform efforts would fail to achieve the desired result -- genuine, albeit gradual, change. International aid donors seemed to operate under an unwritten pact not to "make waves" by supporting political and democratic reform in the Arab and Muslim world. A seeming international reluctance to push political reform in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan helped lead to a perception that international donors only demanded reform of their adversaries or of the powerless.

However, the events of September 11 and the Iraq war brought with them an entirely new set of political and policy dynamics. There is a growing consensus that repression and lack of political freedom in much of the Middle East and larger Islamic world helped breed a group of violent malcontents willing to abuse religion to help export their version of a new political order. Radical political Islam is seen as an avenue of political participation open to the disenchanted and disaffected.

At the same time, Arab activists are in a demanding mood, taking advantage of every opportunity to push for more freedom and more accountability from their leaders. The recent successful elections in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, both characterized by large voter turnout under extremely challenging conditions, are testament to this new spirit. Democrats are active in newly elected legislatures, within reform-oriented political parties, in women's organizations and among the plethora of non-governmental organizations.

These indigenous democratizers declared the debate about the compatibility of democracy and Islam dead long ago, and welcome practical assistance from the United States and other countries. While the men and women who form this nascent indigenous democracy network may have serious misgivings about certain U.S. policies in the region, they are committed to the struggle for democracy in the Middle East and they welcome and deserve outside validation of their quest. Responding to these changes, there has been a discernible shift

in U.S. policy, with a ramping up of initiatives designed to support greater citizen demand for democracy.

### A Strategy for Democracy in the Greater Middle East

A successful Middle East democracy strategy should assume that the majority of Arab and Middle Eastern peoples believe in democratic values. The current state of political affairs in the Arab world is a result of the mutually reinforcing nature of authoritarian rulers on the one hand and religious extremists on the other, rather than any religious or cultural bias against democracy. Drawing strength and legitimacy from each other, these two extremes are in a destabilizing slow dance that has been destroying the fabric of many Arab and Muslim nations.

This destructive circle can only be broken by a democratic or middle alternative, the emergence of which will disrupt the political monopoly of the extremes, in much the same way as the emergence of a democratic middle led to a renewal of democratic politics in the Philippines, Chile and much of Latin America in the late 1980s. The democratic middle exists within the non-governmental organizations that agitate for better policy, better governance and more respect for human rights. Democrats are found within the ranks of political parties, even in certain Islamist groupings, where many share fundamental democratic values and desire that elections be held under transparent and consistent rules. The democratic middle is also present within officialdom, where many toil anonymously to improve the state of public affairs.

Moderate elements within Arab states, whose liberalizing messages are often feared by repressive regimes, find themselves squeezed between the State and the religious extremists; both sides fearing that their power base is threatened by a more open political system.

U.S.-sponsored programs to assist democracy in the Middle East, including MEPI and the Broader Middle East Initiative have been working to straddle the various impractical, and ultimately destructive, policy debates by putting forward a support mechanism for indigenous, as opposed to the perception of imposed, democracy in the Arab and Islamic world.

To the extent that indigenous and independent democratic forces do exist throughout the Middle East, and that, over time, extremism cannot prosper in an environment of greater freedom where political speech is encouraged and rulers are held accountable, a democratization strategy for the region emerges.

Such a strategy is based on identifying and strengthening the moderate middle—professionals, academics, women, students, shopkeepers, who, if given a chance, could play a central role in a democratic system. Working with these and other indigenous democrats, including civil society leaders, human rights activists, reform-minded politicians and modernists within the Islamic movement, the international community can help provide the skills and linkages they need to counter the entrenched extremes.

It should also be recognized that democratic institutions in the Middle East may not fully resemble their western counterparts. Traditional tribal and consultative mechanisms, for example, may exist alongside formal parliaments in certain countries, and political parties may cultivate a more narrow geographical or ethnic base. A comprehensive strategy should also

incorporate a realistic time frame for the development of true democracy, years in many cases, although progress will vary.

Following are some key principles and programs that could form part of a strategy to promote indigenous democracy in the Arab and Islamic worlds:

*Assessing the countries where the openings are the greatest and where democracy is most likely to take hold.*

When considering democratic development, there are three broad groupings of countries in the Middle East. The first group could be considered “breakthrough countries” where circumstances, including a weak state and/or military occupation, have created a climate where elections and democracy are seen as an attractive option for creating new institutions and joining the mainstream international community. Countries/territories in this category include Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza (Palestine).

The second group, sometimes called “liberalizers” and “reformers”, can also be considered “emerging democracies” by virtue of having both a governmental commitment to reform and significant citizen demand for change. Following a “managed” process of change, these countries seek to allow political openings, and are generally hospitable to outside support and engagement. Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Qatar and Yemen all fall into this category.

The third group of countries, some authoritarian, some “semi” authoritarian, actively resist change or seek to manage any process of change to the advantage of the existing leadership. These countries, which tend to be the most critical of outside democracy efforts, insist that change must be completely locally driven but then actively close political space, and hinder political debate and participation. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia are in this category.

*Designing democracy assistance programs to capitalize on the openings available.*

Within the group of liberalizers where assistance is more welcomed, training and support can be provided in a cooperative manner to government, opposition and civil society. Political parties and parliamentarians can be exposed to successful models, and non-governmental organizations, often the vanguard of the democratic middle, seek support on advocacy techniques. Focus groups and scientific opinion research can be used to help politicians understand the demands of voters.

In countries like Egypt, programs should be designed to reinforce constructive and existing citizen demand for change. Programs could include training for women and young people trying to break the monopoly on political power, training on professional standards for journalists, development of democracy web sites, the inclusion of country activists in regional networking, and training of domestic election monitors.

*Using the opportunities created by elections, political leadership changes and other discontinuities to promote contestation of political power.*

Ultimately democracy will only take hold in semi-authoritarian states when a political event occurs that creates an opportunity for an alternation of power. In the meantime, democracy promotion efforts should be aimed at increasing the competitiveness of elections through political party training programs, international and domestic election monitoring efforts and through conflict resolution and coalition building advice to parties and political leaders.

*Supporting women's political empowerment.*

Women, by virtue of being largely excluded from power, have a vested interest in the dispersion of power, one of the fundamental principles of democracy. Women's leadership training, political party internal democracy, and material support and training for female political candidacies can help women break political barriers.

*Building democratic networks.*

There are surprisingly few links among democrats in the Arab and Islamic world. For example, there are few regional Arab voices to speak out against human rights violations or other abuses of freedom and there is no equivalent of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or Organization of American States (OAS) to develop region-wide elections and political standards. Support for networks of democrats of the Islamic world should be actively encouraged; this would help counter, or balance, the devastating use that extremists make of international networks.

### Elections and Democratic Processes

While elections are not a sufficient pre-condition to establish democracy, they are the vehicle through which the people of a country freely express their will, on a basis established by law, as to who shall have the legitimacy to govern in their name and in their interests. Genuine elections provide the means for the people of a country to express their political will, which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and every other major international human rights instrument recognize as the basis for the authority of government. They are both a right and an avenue to promote and protect the exercise of other rights and freedoms, and a requisite condition for the development of a broader process and institutions of democratic governance.

Too often, however, regimes with autocratic tendencies have used elections that they tightly control to maintain their grip on power. These are elections in name only. It was only following electoral processes that were subverted that citizens in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere rose up to defend their fundamental political rights. In many of these cases, U.S. democracy assistance programs provided invaluable support to democrats working to protect these rights.

NDI's programs, and those of other nongovernmental organizations, in these and other places are not designed to seek particular electoral outcomes, but to support those political

processes that embody the aspirations of the people, are guaranteed by their country's constitutions, and are consistent with the principles of regional groupings to which these countries belong, as well as international protocols and standards. These programs have supported: domestic and international observation that seeks to promote a more open electoral process, and deter misconduct, or oppose it should it occur; and efforts of political parties to participate more actively and effectively in the political process. These efforts however, are not simply oriented towards elections. Rather they are designed to support the long-term development of political parties and civic groups – organizations that are central to democratic society.

In recent months, the world has witnessed a number of elections in the Middle East and Central Asia that will have far reaching results. In each situation, significant challenges remain ahead, and there is an ongoing need for international support.

Afghanistan:

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, the international community began a collaborative effort to rebuild a viable economic and political structure in Afghanistan. Many of the Bonn Agreement's ambitious mandates have fulfilled -- albeit with some delay -- including the ratification of a new constitution, promulgation of a political party and election laws, and the holding of the country's first-ever direct presidential election in October last year.

This election demonstrated Afghan citizens' overwhelming interest in, and commitment to, participating in the country's democratic process. Voter turnout was high, with 70 percent of registered Afghan voters participating in the polls, 43 percent of whom were women. While there were some reports of voter intimidation and poll-related violence, the elections were significantly more peaceful and orderly than expected.

A coalition of local civil society organizations, The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), supported and trained by NDI, fielded 2,300 non-partisan election monitors, the largest observation group in the country. This nationwide monitoring effort was particularly important, because security concerns kept international observers confined to Kabul.

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 18. These elections will provide Afghans the first opportunity in almost four decades to choose their representatives. Election authorities face significant administrative challenges in conducting parliamentary, provincial and district-council elections simultaneously, and their task is greatly complicated by the tenuous security environment.

Yet many of Afghanistan's most daunting challenges still lie ahead. In particular, ensuring that the newly elected parliament plays an independent and substantive role in the governing process will be critical if Afghanistan is to institutionalize the democratic gains made to date. To that end, it is essential that reform-minded, democratically-oriented parliamentary members and staff receive the necessary support. The emergence of broad-based, multi-ethnic coalitions will be difficult, as elected representatives may instead resort to organizing around familiar ethnic, tribal or religious patterns.

Continued support from the international community is essential if the government is to be able to address the problems still facing the country. Challenges include reducing the power of warlords and militias, eliminating the narcotics trade, strengthening the disarmament, decommissioning and reintegration process (DDR) and expanding the limited reach of the central government.

NDI has been conducting programs in Afghanistan since 2002 to support the development of emerging political parties and civic groups as effective and viable participants in Afghanistan's political and electoral processes. The Institute has provided technical assistance on political party development and established eight Election Training and Information Centers throughout Afghanistan. In advance of the election, more than 2,500 party members received training in one of these centers. In addition, NDI produced and distributed 50,000 copies of a handbook for party and presidential candidate election monitors, and trained over 10,000 pollwatchers throughout the country.

Iraq:

Despite onerous security, political and logistical challenges, and predictions that violence would disrupt the elections, 59 percent of Iraqis turned out on January 30 to elect members of the 275-seat Transitional National Assembly (TNA) that will run the country, draft a permanent constitution and choose a president and prime minister. Local elections were also held to select regional assemblies, and the Kurds held elections for their own National Assembly.

Most of the nearly 6,000 polling stations expected to operate opened on time and remained open throughout the day. The elections were monitored by a number of officially registered domestic observers including NDI's partner organization, the Iraqi Election Information Network (EIN), which was responsible for training, deploying and overseeing almost 10,000 accredited monitors who observed the voting at 80 percent of the polling stations.

NDI's programs were designed to assist the efforts of parties, civic groups and citizens to participate in the country's political process. In the lead-up to the polls, NDI conducted training sessions for candidates, campaign managers and party agents. The Institute also organized workshops for women candidates for local and national office. NDI helped 60 political entities and coalitions to design and produce printed campaign materials which were distributed throughout Iraq, established a media center where political groups could produce and disseminate effective television messages. Overall, the Institute worked with 11 of the 12 political entities and coalitions that won seats in the TNA.

The democratic process in Iraq, however, has just begun. A new constitution must be drafted with citizen input and new elections for a National Assembly must be held over the next year. Civil society and political institutions must be built from the ground floor. In the months ahead, NDI will provide new TNA members with information and advice on procedural and protocol issues, will offer orientation trainings for new TNA staff members who have little or no previous governance experience, and will help conduct public education on constitutional matters. The Institute will also continue to work with political parties -- including those that chose not to participate in the January polls -- on participating in the constitutional development process, coalition building, improving internal democracy within the party, and organizational



development, and will continue to support EIN as it prepares for the October constitutional referendum and December national elections.

#### West Bank and Gaza:

Large numbers of Palestinians turned out to vote in the January 9 elections for president of the Palestinian Authority, and election day was orderly and generally peaceful. The significant presence of political party and candidate agents, as well as nonpartisan domestic and international observers, added transparency to the process.

International observation delegations, including one organized by NDI and co-led by President Jimmy Carter, former New Jersey governor Christine Todd Whitman and former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, found that overall the election was contested vigorously and administered fairly. The Central Election Commission was able to successfully organize the election in just 60 days under difficult circumstances of the ongoing conflict and occupation, and the Israeli authorities followed through on their commitment to help facilitate freedom of movement of voters and electoral officials through Israeli check points.

There are significant challenges ahead as Palestinians move to consolidate their democratic institutions. Municipal and legislative elections are scheduled for July, and will require careful preparation. Palestinian-Israeli cooperation that marked the planning for the January elections should continue, and the international community should continue to provide support in this crucial transition period. Moreover, as the NDI observer delegation noted, Palestinians have an opportunity to enhance their efforts to ensure public order and to curtail violence, address corruption, reform their political organizations and build a legislative institution that can genuinely perform its representative function.

#### Central Asia:

Efforts aimed at promoting the growth of civil society, freedom and democracy in Central Asia appear -- at this moment -- to be bearing fruit. Parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan on February 26 and March 12 that both international and domestic observers criticized as seriously flawed, brought citizens into the streets to demand their political rights, and eventually led to the dissolution of President Akaev's government. The situation remains fluid as various factions jockey for position, but for now an interim government has restored calm and is working to set dates for a new presidential election in the coming months.

The citizens of Kyrgyzstan were responsible for the developments that have unfolded in recent weeks. Obviously flawed parliamentary elections only compounded frustrations over a crumbling economy and a steady rollback of political freedoms. Yet the people of Kyrgyzstan have not operated in isolation. They have been influenced by the world beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders. The democratic transitions recently experienced in nearby Georgia and Ukraine inspired the events of late March. There has now been a breakthrough in each of the key subregions of the former Soviet Union: the Caucasus, the Slavic region and Central Asia -- no corners of Eurasia now seem impermeable to democratic aspirations.

The credit for the breakthroughs in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine rests squarely with the citizens of those countries. Outside support has made a modest but important contribution to democratic trends in the region. Programs to promote the growth of civil society, freedom and democracy in Central Asia have been operating for well over 10 years. For example, NDI initiated its first democracy assistance programs in Central Asia with USAID funding in 1992, and first opened an office in Kyrgyzstan in 1996.

Democracy assistance programs in Central Asia have focused on reducing the isolation that characterizes these countries of the former Soviet Union, and providing impartial information to allow citizens to engage more actively in the political arena. For its part, NDI has helped in the development of civic groups and worked with political parties, ruling and opposition alike, to organize and reach out to their constituents.

NDI has assisted in building a domestic and regional capacity for election monitoring. Civic organizations from 16 countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have come together under the banner of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) to observe elections in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Collectively over the past 15 years, these organizations, assisted by NDI, have trained more than 100,000 monitors and observed more than 100 elections in their own countries.

In Kyrgyzstan, NDI established a network of 20 information centers where citizens could read the news, share ideas with neighbors, and learn how to conduct nonpartisan community action campaigns. The centers became important sources of information about election-related events during the campaign and immediately following the elections. The Institute also supported the development of a coalition of domestic election monitors that was able to offer an impartial assessment of the recent election procedures and results.

I hope the lesson drawn from events in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Georgia for other countries in the region is the need to embark on meaningful political reform and organize truly democratic elections. Governments should not react by restricting political space or curtailing the work of local and international organizations. In the meantime, the international community should continue its efforts to support the development of political parties, civic groups and legislatures.

### Internationalism in Democracy Promotion

At a time when there is growing recognition of the interconnectedness between economic prosperity and democracy, more and more other nations, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations and international financial institutions are beginning to engage in democracy promotion and human rights activities.

We have been most successful at NDI when we have joined with others to share democratic skills. As a practical matter, peoples making the transition to democracy require diverse experiences. The experiences of democrats from other nations -- from new and established democracies alike -- are often more relevant than our own.

Cooperative approaches also convey a deeper truth to nations attempting a transition to democracy: that they are not ceding something to the United States when they develop democratic institutions; rather, they are joining a community of nations. That other nations have traversed the same course. That while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on natural allies and an active support structure. And that other nations are concerned and are watching — something that would-be autocrats, who flourish outside the glare of the international spotlight, will bear in mind.

### Role of U.S. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

While the U.S. government can set the tone, and foreign aid can provide needed resources for democratic development, much of the work on the ground must be done by non-governmental organizations. This is particularly true in the Middle East and Central Asia. Groups such as NDI are capable of assuming responsibility, yet are not constrained by the stringent rules of formal diplomacy. NGOs can readily share information, knowledge and experiences with groups and individuals who are pursuing or consolidating democracy, sometimes without the cooperation or sanction of their government.

Perhaps most important, in countries where one of the primary issues being addressed is the paucity of autonomous civic and political institutions, the fundamental idea that government ought not to control all aspects of society can be undermined by a too-visible donor government hand in the development and implementation of democracy programs.

NGO initiatives must grow out of the needs of democrats in the host country. The work should always be in the open and should be conducted with partners committed to pluralism and nonviolence. At the same time, consultation is necessary with the Congress, USAID missions and embassies. When public funds are used, transparency and accountability should always prevail.

### Importance of Political Party Programs

If there is one area where the allocation of additional resources would increase the effectiveness of democracy assistance programs, it would be in the area of political party modernization and reform.

Political parties serve a function unlike any other institution in a democracy. By aggregating and representing social interests, they provide a structure for political participation. They act as training grounds for political leaders who will eventually assume governing roles. They foster necessary competition and accountability in governance. In the legislative arena, they translate policy preferences into public policies. It should come as no surprise, then, that when political parties fail to fulfill their special roles, the entire democratic system is placed in jeopardy.

In recent years it has been civic organizations that have received the bulk of democracy assistance funding. The international development community has buttressed civic groups and assisted their rise. This is a good and necessary endeavor; NDI has participated in many such initiatives and continues to do so. At the same time, the danger in focusing almost exclusively on

civil society development is that civil society activism without effective political institutions quickly creates a vacuum. It sows opportunities for populists and demagogues who wish to weaken parties and legislatures -- the cornerstones of representative democracy. The international community must respond to the need to build, sustain, and renew political parties in a way that matches our efforts to build and sustain civil society.

The democratization of political parties must be a priority in the efforts to restore public confidence in parties and the democratic process as a whole. Greater citizen participation, accountability of leadership, transparency, and institutional safeguards are more important now than ever for this effort to succeed.